A SHORT HISTORY OF FORT DUNVEGAN

"To Dunvegan we came, very willing to be at rest, and found our fatigue ample recompensed by our reception."

Johnson --- The Western Islands (1773)

These words might well have been written by many an early traveller on the Peace River. For over a century Dunvegan was the best known fort on the Peace River and it's name appeared on every map of the north country, long after it's importance as a trading post had declined.

The first white man to Dunvegan was Alexander Mackenzie when, on May 11, 1793, two days out from the Forks on his journey in search of the Western Ocean. He was accosted here by a Beaver Indian band.

Since the Indians were anxious to trade, the idea of a post on this site may well have occured to Mackenzie, who was a trader before he was an explorer.

Eleven years later, in March 1804, David Thompson, the North-West Co's surveyor, noted the spot as a suitable place for a post and camped there on his return from Rocky Mountain House. The following year the North West Company had made definite plans for a permanent post here.

During the winter of 1805-6 logs and pickets were got out and hauled across the river on the ice and, in the early spring of 1806 they commenced the building of the palisades, bastions and block houses. The work of building this first fort was in charge of Archibald Norman McLeod and we are fortunate in having available a copy of the original "Journal of Daily Transactions at Dunvegan" from April 18th to October 14th, 1806. This journal was apparently kept by Alexander Roderick McLeod who was the

chief clerk in charge of the whole Athabaska district.

During the spring of 1806 there were some forty-five men employed at Dunvegan, in addition to the officers of the North West Co. and the Indian hunters and hangers-on.

During the summer of 1806 the small garrison left there suffered numerous hardships. Fire destroyed part of the fort, an Indian died from poison food, one squaw attempted to commit suicide and two others ran away and had to be recaptured.

Extracts from the "Journal" are interesting reading: "April 24th: "This morning Mr. McLeod got a quarreling with Foret. The consequence was that Foret got a kicking and a vlow on the head that knocked him down senseless, but he soon recovered from the blow he got and walked about. Some meat was put out yesterday to dry and Nasplette watched it for some would take it. The only one known to be guilty is Martineau whom Mr. McLeod spoke to, and, in order to punish him he took his wife and gave her to M. Cardieu, who is more able to maintain her, Martineau being much in debt."

April 28th ..."The Owl War Chief and their bands arrived. With these Indians came le Mari des deux jolies femmes who had been, since last spring with the Slave Indians, of whom there were twelvelodges.

He attempted to make us believe a number of stories by telling us there was a fort near the sea, inhabitied by people quite different to us in many respects. He was severly reprimanded for telling such lies and much laughed at by the Indians present." May 16th..."J. Hoole arrived from the Forks where he left old Pasquette making a garden." (The Forks -- Mackenzie's old fort at the Smokey. There are still descendants of the Hooles and Pasquettes in this district.) July 5th -- "There being

no meat at the Fort therefore work was stopped." July 6th -- "This is the first day of this year that we went without eating and of course no work done." July 8th -- "This evening a dog was killed which is to be paid for between F. Goedike, David Holmes, Cardinal Trudelle and Landrie." July 9th --"The men all hunting or fishing but very unlucky. We are now in a very alarming situation, not having a mouthful to eat. The children are always going about the Fort, crying for something to eat. Landrie killed a dog."

The following day a little meat was obtained from a band of Indians and on July 14th-- "Ten women of the Flux Band arrived loaded with meat. They brought 1182 lbs. dried meat, 721 lbs pounded and 170 lbs. grease."

Aug. 17th -- "P. Coupe with a few others arrived. They have made a poor hunt." (This was evidently Pouce Coupe after whom the Pouce Coupe district was named. Charles Mair spells the name "Poosecapee" and it appears to be a Beaver Indian word meaning "a discarded beaver dam". The french form is a corruption and the old legion of the prospector who cut his thumb off with an axe is without foundation.)

On October 11th A. N. McLeod arrived "in a light canoe with nine men." six days out of Fort Vermillion and fourteen days from Fort Chipewyan. The following day, Blondin with a brigade of seven canoes, accompanied by "Mr. A. Mackenzie". This would probably be Andrew Mackenzie as Alexander Mackenzie had, by that time, left the north.

In 1809 D. W. Harmon, famous as a North West Co. explorer, took over Fort Dunvegan, to be succeeded in turn by John McGillvray.

Other famous North-West Company traders whose names are connected with Dunvegan include McDonald McTavish, Joseph McGillvray, John George

McTavish, James Leith, while Simon Fraser, John Finlay and Samuel Black all outfitted or stopped off at Dunvegan during their voyages of exploration.

During 1815 & 1817, two attempts of the Hudson's Bay Company to establish themselves on the Peace River were turned back by the rival company, with a loss of life to the HBC of seventeen men and a large amount of trade goods.

In July 1816, George Keith of the N.W. Co. in a letter states: "This uear (1816) we have ample reinforcements (for Athabaska) of men and goods and Mr. McLeod (Archibald Norman) has been clothed with the totle of Superintendent and we hope to drive the H.B. Co. out of Athabaska again." At the same time a letter from the factor at Fort des Prairies (Edmonton) to John McTavish states: "Mr. McLeod is to winter in Athabaska. He will be of service for, you know, il peut faire le grade, and that is important among the Indians, especially a stout man, a red coat and a long sword."

Archibald Norman McLeod, with his red coat and long sword, which were legacies of the war of 1812, must have been quite a fire-eater, for he wrote from Fort Chipewyan in September of that year that "he was going to bring the English in Athabaska into order and would expel the H.B. Co. from the Indian territory and would destroy their establishments. Mr. John McGillvray and Mr. Simon Fraser had been entirely too leninet towards the servants of that company on the preceding year. It was rediculous to be scrupulous in driving them out and destroying their posts, and he would stand at no trifle."

However, peace was restored with the Union in 1821 of the two rival companies, under the terms of which the old partners of the N.W. Co.

held a proportion of shares of about three to two. (The H.B. Co never built at Dunvegan. They rebuilt the N.W.Co. fort -- probably about 1827.)

After the union in 1821, things must have been quieter at Dunvegan; other trading posts had been established at Fort St. John, Hudsons Hope and in the vicinity of the old Fort at the Forks.

In 1825 the fort was closed for two years as a punishment for the destruction by the Indians of the Fort at St. John.

The post was reopened in 1828 in charge of Colin Campbell, a son-in-law of John McGillivray, one of its early factors.

Toward the middle of the century, other important events took place at Dunvegan. In 1845, Father Bourassa arrived to preach to the Indians and minister to the bourgeois at the fort.

This was the first visit of a missionary to the Peace River, and he was followed, ten years later, in 1855 by Father Lacombe.

In 1866 Father Tessier arrived at Dunvegan to found St. Charles Mission which, with St. Bernards at Lesser Slave Lake, became one of the main roots of the Athabaska Diocese of the Catholic Church.

Father Tessier spent thirteen years alone at Dunvegan, suffering great hardships and visited in that time only by two other priests, one of whom was Father Lacombe, who revisited Dunvegan in 1870.

In 1883 Bishop Grouard arrived at Dunvegan to replace Father Tessier, whose health had broken down. Bishop, or Father Grouard as he was then, was welcomed at the post by his great friend Dr. McKay, whose name is still well known in Edmonton.

An interesting thing is that Father Lacombe, when he first visited Dunvegan in 1855, speaks of being welcomed by Mr. Bourassa, who was then in charge.

This Mr. Bourassa's son, John Bourassa, carried the Hudson's Bay mail for many yearsfrom Dunvegan ro Fort Chipewyan and is still living and active, at Fort Vermillion, His son, in turn, Louis Bourassa, for years carried the government mail from Peace River to Vermillion up to the time of his death which occured shortly after he had been awarded the medal of the Order of the British Empire at the time of King George V's Jubilee. After his death his son, Johnnie Bourassa continued to carry the Vermillion mail until it was taken over by the air service, and still acts as pilot on one of the river boats, plying between Peace River and Fort Vermillion Records in the Canadian Archives show that a certain Francois Bourassa was trading into "le pays en haut (Illinois) in 1688 and a Rene Bourassa was engaged to trade for the Hudson's Bay Co. in 1725.

Bishop Grouard in his book "Souvenirs de mes Soixante Ans d'Apostolat dans L'Athabaska --Mackenzie" tells a most interesting story of his four years at Dunvegan. Especially interesting is his account of building the church which still stands on the banks of the river at Dunvegan. When they, Father Grouard and his companion, Father Husson, decided to secure logs to build their church, the river was already frozen over. To quote his words: "happily a thaw came to break the ice and free the river." They engaged "un bon Castor" (a Beaver Indian) to help them and took a boat three days up river where they cut the logs, rolled them down to the bank and built their raft. By this time the ice was running again and their raft was frozen in close to the mission, and the next day, "le cher frere Bachan retira les arbes de L'eau avec un bon beouf." They spent the winter hewing the logs and sawing the lumber by hand and he adds, "je puis dire que je n'ai jamais tant force de ma vie."

The chruch was completed the following year and he calls it "Une vraie cathedrale pour nos Castors et nos Metis."

Wishing to embellish it, Bishop Grouard decided to paint "Notre-Seigneur mort sur la croix". Having no canvas, he commissioned an Indian hunter to secure him a good moose-hide, free of blemish: "si tu vois un original (moose), tache de le tuer sans dechirer lepeau, j'en besoin." He goes on to describe how the hide of the moose (il avait tire l'original dans la tete) was tanned and stretched.

"Puis je dessinai et coloriai Notre- Seigneur en croix, avec la Sainte Vierge et Sait Joseph."

He continued: "J'ajouterai meme que tout le monde admirait ce tableau. Un borgne est roi au pays des aveugles; et la ou personne n'avait jamais manie le pinceau, on me regarde comme un grand artiste."

This picture was hung behind the altar in the church at Grouard and, when that mission was abandoned, was moved to Spirit River and, afterwards to the church at Peace River where it hangs, proof both of Bishop Grouards skill as an artist and devotion as a priest.

In 1891, the Beavers, original inhabitants of the country, had largely died out and the Catholic Mission of St. Charles was closed and transferred to St. Augustine's in the Shaftesbury Settlement, between Dunvegan and the Forks.

Dunvegan was also the scene of one of the first Anglican Missions in the north country. The Revd. A. C. Garriock visited there in 1880 and in 1882 Revd. J. Gough Brick established a mission. Mr. Brick's interest in agriculture resulted in the first farming experiments on any scale being begun at Dunvegan.

After growing wheat successfully on his farm on the flats, Mr. Brick started an experimental farm near Old Wives Lake, on the plateau above Dunvegan. Later he moved to Shaftesbury Settlement and grew the wheat

there which gained the World's Championship at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, a success which was duplicated some thirty-five years later by Herman Trelle.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Garrioch, the first Protestant missionary at Dunvegan, was a grandson of Colin Campbell, chief trader in charge at Dunvegan in 1828 and a great-grandson of John McGillivray, a partner of the North West Co. and who was stationed at Dunvegan in 1812.

After the union of 1821, life at Dunvegan must have been comparatively uneventful though many distinguished travellers were entertained there, amongst others, Sir George Simpson in 1828, on his triumphal tour of the Peace River by canoe.

In 1873, Sir William Francis Butler stopped at Dunvegan on his travels across the continent by dog-team, the story of which he tells in his book, "The Wild North Land."

The trading post was finally closed in 1918. Mr. Fred Bedson being the last store manager.

The name "Dunvegan", chosen by Mr. Archiband Norman McLeod from his home in the Isle of Skye, was adopted by the builders of the first railroad to Peace River -- the Edmonton, Dunvegan & British Columbia Railway -- and, in consequence, real estate operators in 1914, profiting by the boom days, subdivided some seven quarter sections into town lots, hundreds of which sold to unfortunate speculators in England and eastern Canada.

After the closing of the HBC store, a government telegraph operator was stationed at Dunvegan for a few years, but today nothing is left of it's former activities except the ferry-man who still occupies the old Hudson's Bay Factor's house.

The church which Bishop Grouard built, with its sky-blue chancel roof, decorated with stars cut from tin-foil, is used as a store house and no trace can be seen of the palisade, bastions and block houses built by McLeod in 1806.

Doubtless thorough search of the surrounding land would reveal some signs of where these once stood.

May 29, 1940